

THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

Faith for Tough Times

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Days of trouble can arrive subtly, suddenly, like a snow squall that surprises journeyers. Those caught off guard on forbidding and treacherous trails find relief when their distressed company comes across a cave, a hollow, or best of all, a shelter. Only one, God, reliably is there. Stumbling across this sanctuary we discover that, long and usually overlooked, it has been available all along. The Provider of that shelter waits to rescue us as we stumble. The provision of shelter offered so freely is a strength and security for this day and brings the richness of promise for tomorrow.

Martin E. Marty
"Shelter"

*The Promise of Winter: Quickening the Spirit
on Ordinary Days and in Fallow Seasons*

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FAITH FOR TOUGH TIMES

"Do not fear I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you..." Isaiah 43:1, 2

God of all time, God of history, we come here out of busy, hurried lives. We seem always to be behind time, short of time, out of time. We come here this morning hungry for a word from you: longing for you to bless the time you have given us, this time together. So, startle us with your truth and your love: in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

* * *

"I have called you by name, you are mine...when you pass through the waters I will be with you."

Have you seen that wonderful television commercial for Dean Witter? A father is standing waist deep in the water of a river. His small son stands on the edge of a dock. The father beckons to his son to jump in. The little boy hesitates, teeters on the edge. He wants to, wants to trust his father. But there's the threat and danger of the water. He's frightened. He's caught between his desire to trust his father and his fear. Finally, he jumps into the water toward his father's waiting arms. He submerges and immediately his father's strong hands are there to catch him and save him and hold him.

It's about trust... "When you pass through the waters I will be with you..." Trust when it's difficult to trust, trust when you're frightened, trust in a time of trouble.

The text and the television commercial reminded me of a John Updike short story. Updike's stories and novels often have almost transparent religious and biblical meaning. This particular story, "Trust Me," which I have used before, puts a very different twist on the theme of the text and the television commercial.

It's about a little boy, about three or four, and the day his parents take him to a swimming pool. What he remembers about that day is this:

"His father, nearly naked, was in the pool treading water. Harold was standing, shivering on the wet tile edge, suspended above the abysmal odor of chlorine.... His mother... was off in a corner of his mind. His father was asking him to jump. 'C'mon, Hassy, jump,' he was saying, in his mild, encouraging voice. 'It'll be all right. Jump right into my hands.' The words echoed in the flat acoustics of the water and tile and sunlight, heightening Harold's sense of exposure, his awareness of his own white skin."

Finally, Harold jumps ...

“Then the blue-green water was all around him, dense and churning, and when he tried to take a breath a fist was shoved into his throat. He saw his own bubbles rising in front of his face, a multitude of them rising as he sank: he sank, it seemed, for a very long time, until something located him in the darkness and seized him by the arm.

“He was in the air again, on his father’s shoulder, still fighting for breath. They were out of the pool.... Standing wrapped in a towel near his mother’s knees while the last burning fragments of water were coughed from his lungs, Harold felt eternally disgraced.

“He never knew what had happened: by the time he asked, so many years had passed that his father had forgotten. ‘Wasn’t that a crying shame,’ the old man said, with his mild mixture of mournfulness and comedy. ‘Sink or swim, and you sank.’” [*Trust Me, Other Stories*, p. 3]

“When you pass through the waters, I will be with you.” Updike captures the issue. Sometimes, in life, the persons or systems we assume are there for us fail. Sometimes it doesn’t feel as if there is anyone there. It is a major biblical theme. Twenty-five hundred years ago, God’s people were thinking like that, in exile, in Babylonian captivity. The armies of Babylon had cruelly and efficiently burned, destroyed, leveled their home – Jerusalem, Zion, gleaming, lovely city on a hill, secure, strong, safe, with its wall and gates and towers and shining temple...reduced to rubble and ashes. The old ones would never forget what it looked like.

Nothing that happened to us last year representing the Presbyterian Church was as emotionally powerful as a tour, in a United Nations van, through the streets of Vukovar, a lovely Croatian city, absolutely destroyed – every public building: schools, libraries, hospitals, stores, churches, apartment buildings, homes in which families had lived – burned-out shells. We were chatting with one another and our Croatian hosts and even the Russian driver and slowly, as we witnessed the destruction, we fell silent.

The old ones in Babylon would never forget what their beautiful city looked like after the Babylonian assault, and the day when the soldiers routed them from the rubble of their homes and forced them to march, with what few possessions they could carry through the burned-out streets and the long stretch of dusty roads and then the desert, to Babylon, where they had been held captive for seventy years.

And then someone who was still back in Jerusalem wrote a letter to the captives in Babylon. It is one of the most exquisite documents in all of literature and one of the most important parts of the Bible. It is located in the last part of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.

His letter announces that the long, dark night is over. God is about to act. Salvation, rescue, redemption, return, reunion, is about to happen. And, in fact, he was right. Cyrus the Persian would defeat the armies of Babylon and send the captive Hebrew community back to Jerusalem. The poetry is beautiful and familiar: “Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.... Make

straight in the wilderness a highway.... Those who wait for the Lord will renew their strength: they shall mount up with wings like eagles: they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.” And, perhaps most beautiful of all, “I have called you by name, you are mine... when you pass through the waters I will be with you....”

There is a current bestseller, *The Perfect Storm*, and a motion picture, “Titanic,” that continue to document the deep and almost mythological threat of water. Water is the primal chaos before creation. Creation happens when the waters are separated and dry land appears. And Israel’s most important corporate memory – like our national memory of Lexington, Concord, Yorktown, Gettysburg, was that magnificent and miraculous day when the people escaped the pursuing Egyptian army through the waters of the Red Sea.

The foundation of the faith of God’s people was the promise that in the fires of defeat and destruction, in deep, threatening waters, God would be with them. Tragedy, sadness, trouble, would not overwhelm them because of God’s presence.

One day, when he was thirty years of age, Jesus of Nazareth, struggling, I have always assumed, with the meaning and purpose of his own life, his vocation, responded to the strong words of John the Baptist by walking into the waters of the Jordan River and allowing John to immerse him in the water. He surely remembered the promise and he heard a voice which also echoed the ancient words, “I have called you by name.” What Jesus heard that day as he emerged from the water was that he was God’s beloved, God’s son, and that God would be with him. Surely the meaning of that day stayed with him and gave him strength and courage every day of his life, particularly that day when he walked right into the valley of the shadow of death.

We are still remembering – invoking all of that when we, as the heirs of those ancient people, introduce our infants into the community of faith in baptism. We remember the water and the promise, “I have called you by name.” And still for Christian people all over the world in a variety of circumstances those promises, trust in those promises is a saving resource in times of trouble.

It is sometimes difficult for us to comprehend in this land of liberty and personal religious freedom, but people in other parts of the world are paying dearly for their faith. There is a sudden awareness on the part of human rights groups and even our own State Department that Christians are persecuted in our world and our time. The Pope’s visit to Cuba prompted the Castro government to relax many of the former restrictions and prohibitions against the public practice of religion. Cuban Christians this year, for the first time in 36 years, celebrated Christmas in their churches. And it reminded me of conversations with leaders of the Presbyterian Reformed Church of Cuba about the cost of remaining faithful to Jesus Christ and one’s own conscience in a political system which regards religion as a subversive and oftentimes criminal activity.

Difficult for us to comprehend, in the comfort and security of our freedom, but there are faithful Christians in North Korea: 500 Presbyterian congregations, all but two have had their buildings confiscated, struggling bravely to hold on to one another and to be the church secretly. They know, as you and I perhaps have never known, what it means to be sustained by and held in the saving grace of God.

We learned about the cost and the sustaining power of God when we visited last year. At Yonsei University we visited and loved an art exhibit. The paintings, in traditional Korean folk style, are of scenes of the life of Jesus. We liked them so much we bought a book. The artist, Mr. Kim, is a North Korean in his 70s. He's a Christian. He, along with many others, fled for their lives during the Korean War. Some did not escape. My friend, Syngman Rhee, who works for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in Worldwide Ministries, was a boy when the Communists took over and remembers the day he and his mother were forced to watch as his father, a prominent Christian, was shot by North Korean troops. Mr. Kim escaped, leaving behind his young bride and their new baby. Recently people like Syngman Rhee and Insik Kim, Our Director of Far East Mission, have been allowed across to North Korea. And recently, Mr. Kim the artist contacted Mr. Kim the American Presbyterian who was planning a trip to the North to the very area where Mr. Kim the artist had left his wife and child. "See if she's still there," he asked Insik. If she is, please tell her I have never married again and I still love her." Insik did it, looked for and found Mrs. Kim, introduced himself and told her about her husband's love – sustained for almost fifty years. She was pleased. She had raised their son, had not married. "Tell him I think about him every day." She disappeared into a small pantry and emerged holding a jar of honey. "Please give it to him. I remember how when he painted he would not stop even to eat his dinner. Tell him the honey is to make him strong."

I will never forget that story. "When you pass through the waters I will be with you...when you pass through the fire you will not be burned."

Sometimes the toughest of times come in the form of sickness.

The late John Carmody was a scholar, Professor of Religion at Santa Clara University, California, a delightful, lively Christian who, during a routine physical examination, was told that he had multiple melanoma and had perhaps 30-36 months to live, with very aggressive treatment. He began to write about his experience and his faith and struggle and doubt and courage.

In the introduction to a book of psalms – *Prayers for Times of Trouble*, he wrote:

"Certainly God remains the Lord, sovereign in all ways. Nonetheless, God is also 'Our Lord,' a divinity we can imagine holding shares in our enterprises, caring what happens to us. Is there any thought more consoling?" These are deep matters, ultimate mysteries. If God holds our hand, then even though we walk through the valley of the shadow of darkness, we may fear no evil." [p. 9]

He began to pray a lot, to "tax God with my troubles," because he said both as a scholarly theologian but also as a man of simple, very human faith, he had come to the same conclusion, "God is part of this."

Life-threatening disease may not be your trouble. In fact, you may be blessed by not having major problems. This may be a good time, a great time for you.

John Carmody looked out at the world with a wry sense of humor.

“Trouble is everywhere,” he wrote. You can be completely healthy and yet “face huge problems that threaten to plow you under. You can avoid alcohol and drugs and lose your job or suffer a heart attack. You can say your prayers every night and still suffer aching loneliness, doubt. Teenagers can be desperately lonely, but so can old people. Women can worry themselves sick, but so can men. Trouble spares no age group, no ethnic group, no religious denomination.”

And then, with a twinkle in his eye, I think, he wrote:

“If it has yet to get its claws into your hide, count yourself lucky – but don’t plan on your luck continuing.” [p. 5]

The promise is that we are not alone. In good times we’re not alone; days when the sun is shining and we feel great and all our children are happy, our friends are successful, our parents content, our portfolio, like United Airlines, rising. And in tough times, when the bottom falls out, when the sun isn’t shining at all, when our children or parents are unhappy, our friends are unemployed, our spouse or significant other is distracted, unattentive, uninterested, or when the test comes back positive, or we simply feel within our bodies and souls what someone has rightly called, “the insult of our mortality,” the promise is we are not alone.

“When you pass through the waters, I will be with you.”

You are not cut loose in an anonymous, free-floating, impersonal universe. You are not a statistic, a solitary candle that will be snuffed out as Shakespeare put it, a player who struts and frets on the stage for a brief hour and then is heard no more. You are known by someone. You belong to someone.

“I have called you by name and you are mine.”

We invoke that promise – invoke is not strong enough: we claim that promise every time we baptize our children. It’s lovely. The babies are wonderful. They’re all dressed up for the occasion. So are their parents, nervous that their baby will cry or grab the minister’s glasses. The grandparents can barely contain their pride. In fact, you can almost see it, that grandparent pride – in a kind of cloud hovering over the first three pews. It’s a lovely occasion. But it is also perhaps the most powerful and profound and daring and brave thing that happens when we – you and I, minister and people, church, claim for this child the promise. “I have called you by name...” Grant Michael, Charles Ashman, Ian McCormick, Samantha Paige, James Arthur, Benjamin Richard. “You are mine. When you pass through the water, I will be with you.” It is said that when Martin Luther was in trouble, in the darkest days when his church had branded him a heretic and the emperor declared him a criminal and it seemed like there was no hope, he would write on his slate Latin words, “Baptizatus sum ... I am baptized.”

That is why we pray, "Remind us of the promises given in our own baptism." Because for each of us there will come a day when we will need that promise.

I visited with Jodi McDevitt and Dan Krebill last spring, co-pastors of the First Presbyterian Church of Bozeman, Montana. They were on the staff at McCormick and were part of our congregation here every Sunday with their children. In fact, Alice was featured in one of our stewardship brochures a few years ago. Her picture and mine were in it together and I enjoyed that association. Alice is seven now. Jodi told me a wonderful story about Alice and the promise.

It seems that her public school teacher was teaching her class about both Christmas and Hanukah. Alice was fascinated with Hanukah, the Jewish Festival of Lights. She came home and asked Jodi about it, what it meant. Jodi explained the history and the meaning of the lights and that it was a special Jewish holiday.

"What's Jewish mean?" Alice asked.

And Jodi tried to answer. "You're a Christian," she said.

"What's that mean?"

And again Jodi tried to explain.

"How do you know if you're a Jew or a Christian," Alice asked.

And Jodi said, "You're a Christian if you're baptized."

Alice paused, thought a long moment and said, "I belong to Jesus Christ."

"What do you mean?" Jodi asked.

And Alice said, "I belong to Jesus Christ. That's what the minister says when he baptizes those babies."

Yes, it's the promise we remember and claim for the babies and for ourselves, every day of our lives.

"I have called you by name. You are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you."

Amen.